

Carrot but no stick for a healthy child

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Obesity among children has long been a rising problem in large parts of the world. Parents play a crucial role in shaping good childhood eating habits, according to new research from the University of Stavanger.

Providing [youngsters](#) with fruit and vegetables, involving them in buying and cooking [healthy food](#), and encouraging them to eat it are key [elements](#) for creating [healthy eating habits](#), this study finds.

But nutritionist Elisabeth Lind Melbye at the University of Stavanger, who did the work, warns against strict rules on what [children](#) can or cannot eat.

That can actually make them less healthy, she discovered on looking at what works – and does not work – when parents seek to teach their offspring how to eat healthy.

Increasing

Accordingly to health statistics, the number of young children who are overweight or obese has been rising steadily over the past 30 years.

The proportion in the USA, the UK and southern Europe is almost twice as high as in northern Europe. Nevertheless, roughly one in five Norwegian eight-year-olds is overweight or obese.

At the same time, daily consumption of fruit and vegetables by children in Norway is far below the recommended level – and Melbye views

these developments with concern.

She now wants to mobilise parents in the fight against obesity, and her PhD thesis has taken a closer look at the vital part they play in encouraging a positive diet.

Some 800 Norwegian children aged 10-12 and their parents took part in this study, which also tested a broader measurement tool than has been used in earlier work on the issue.

Moreover, Melbye has focused on relatively older children compared with previous research in the USA and France, which looked at youngsters aged from two to eight.

Myths

Her study tackles some of the myths about good strategies for encouraging [healthy eating](#) by children, and she sums up the recipe for establishing a good diet as follows.

"The most important thing parents can do is to have healthy food on hand for their child, who should be allowed to help itself to this whenever it wants."

Melbye also maintains that the value of the physical act of preparing food in the home has long been undervalued.

Similarly, parents must ensure that unhealthy food is not available except at parties. In with the fruit bowl, out with the sweet packet, she emphasises.

"In addition to exposing children to healthy food, they ought also to participate in its preparation and in planning meals. Let them cut up

vegetables and help in the kitchen".

"And take them with you to the shops. If they're old enough, you can also discuss healthy eating with them and explain why it's good for the body".

Relationship

Inculcating a good relationship with food from an early age is an important lesson Melbye wants to convey. But parents must not be too strict.

While earlier international studies have devoted most attention to parental control of child eating, she has also looked at the way youngsters make their own choices.

"If parents are unreasonably strict and restrictive over diet, their offspring might develop a yearning for unhealthy food. They then eat less of the healthy options.

"That's the paradox – forbidden fruit is tempting. So even when [parents](#) encourage a good diet, the child itself must also feel that it has both the opportunity and desire to eat properly".

"As a result, the goal should be to create a sound home environment, where a healthy and varied diet and good experiences with food are the main ingredients".

More information: Melbye, Øgaard & Øverby: Validation of the Comprehensive Feeding Practices Questionnaire with parents of 10-to-12-year-olds, BMC Medical Research Methodology 2011, 11:113, [doi:10.1186/1471-2288-11-113](https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-11-113)

Melbye, Øverby & Øgaard: Child consumption of fruit and vegetables: the roles of child cognitions and parental feeding practices, *Public Health Nutrition*, 2011 Oct 17:1-9, [doi: 10.1017/S1368980011002679](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980011002679)

Provided by University of Stavanger

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